

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## Ethics and Justification by Faith Alone

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*But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come, for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slandering, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasures rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness, but denying its power. From such people turn away (2 Timothy 3:1-5).*

Once it was generally accepted that right and wrong must be judged by some objective, absolute standard. More than one hundred years ago society began to believe in evolution instead of divine creation. The next step was perfectly logical and inevitable. If God is not our creator, perhaps he is not our judge. Existentialism, situation ethics, and relativism are based on the premise that each person is the only judge of his beliefs and actions, and therefore he is not responsible to any absolute, external, objective standard for his conduct.

Christians need to be especially aware that this same spirit of disrespect for law flourishes in the visible church. In Paul's list of last-day sins, quoted above, the burden is not to show how bad the world will be at the end time. The apostle describes the conditions that will exist in *the visible church* in the last days (*i.e.*, among those "having a form of godliness").

While the secular liberals talk of "the responsible self" and "social consciousness" in place of law, theological liberals talk of "Christian love" and "the guidance of the Holy Spirit" as taking the place of law. It is the same tune, second verse. Neo-evangelicals have carried on such a one-sided attack against "legalism" that *law* has become a dirty word. Under the influence of liberalism and neo-evangelicalism, *legalism* has evolved a new meaning. It used to mean the wrong use of law (as a means of salvation), now it is often taken to mean conscientious obedience to rules of any kind. As society is being deluged by corruption, lawlessness, crime, and rottenness that defies description, it needs no encouragement from the visible church to show disrespect for the moral law of God.

### *Justification by Faith Alone and Respect for Law*

We agree with J. Gresham Machen, who wrote, "One way to encourage respect for law, we think, would be to make law more respectable" (*What Is Faith?* 168). How do we make law more respectable?

There are some, there have always been some—see Romans 9—who are ready to blame justification by faith alone for lack of ethical action in the church. They feel that this great Christian doctrine needs to be played down, while more emphasis needs to be given to sanctification and practical Christian

living. This is a happy eventuality for Rome, which has always contended that Luther's doctrine loosens the reins of moral restraint. The great Reformation principle of justification by faith alone is in no way responsible for fostering disrespect for law. This is an age that knows almost nothing about the doctrine of justification by faith alone. It is impossible to be strong on justification by faith and weak on ethics. *Justification* is a term of *law*. No two Bible concepts stand more closely related than *justification* and *law*. To honor and uphold justification is to honor and uphold the law (*Romans* 3:31). Returning to Machen's proposition, how may we make law more respectable? By putting the truth of justification back into the center of the Christian message where it belongs. Wherever and whenever this truth is exalted and taught, the Spirit of God breathes new life into the church and equips its members for "every good work."

### *The Fear of God, Justification, and Ethics*

The great Biblical truth of justification by faith alone does not make sense unless it is seen against the background of the fear of God. The Bible says the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (*Proverbs* 9:10), the foundation of piety (*Job* 1:8), the core of obedience (*Ecclesiastes* 12:13; *Genesis* 22:11, 12), the basis of ethical integrity (*Genesis* 20:11; *Proverbs* 8:13; 16:6), and the foundation of sanctification (*2 Corinthians* 7:1). The Holy Spirit is called "the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord" (*Isaiah* 11:2). To fear God means to respond to him with reverential awe, humble respect, and profound adoration. This attitude toward God comes by a vivid understanding of the majesty of him who is constantly aflame with holiness, truth, and goodness, and of the wrath of him whose justice is fiery indignation against sin.

Whenever men are taught the fear of the Lord by a confrontation with God's righteousness and his claims upon their lives, they are led to cry out, "How can I be just with God?" They do not take it for granted that God forgives, but they are so impressed with the righteousness of God that their own conscience demands, "How can God justly

forgive me?" They feel like Spurgeon, who cried out, "I felt I could not be forgiven unless I could be forgiven justly." This is the great problem that Paul solves for us in his message to the Romans—how God demonstrates his justice in the remission of sins (*Romans* 3:25-26).

When we look at the current religious scene, there is little evidence that people are asking such *theocentric* (God-centered) questions. Instead, they are asking *anthropocentric* (man-centered) questions: How can God make me happy? How can Christ make my life run smoothly and joyously? How can I solve my problems and find fulfillment in life? Never has so much religious activity been so disinterested in the question of *justification* with God. Why? Because there is so little fear of God. People can wave their arms or jump up and down "in the Spirit." But if the religious interest is not marked by a great fear of God, it is not the work of the Holy Spirit, for he is "the Spirit . . . of the fear of the Lord." Again, why is there such an appalling disinterest in justification by faith? Because people are taking it for granted that God is gracious and forgiving. In fact, they feel that they are on such good terms with him that they talk to him as if he were (to use Luther's complaint against the Enthusiasts) "a shoemaker's apprentice." How can justification be a concern when there is no marked fear of God?

Consider how these man-centered questions are patently foolish in the light of man's predicament. Here is a wretched sinner, bound hand and foot and consigned to Hell for his great crimes against his maker. Standing on the threshold of eternal damnation, he presumes to ask, "How can God make me happy?" Such a question shows he has no understanding of his awful predicament. If the Spirit gives him any true enlightenment of his situation, he will cry out, "How can I be right with God?"

We are not suggesting that God is indifferent to the earthly happiness of his children. But we do not find happiness in trying to use God as if he were our lackey. Nowhere do we find such genuine, exultant joy as in *Romans* 5 and 8. This holy, sacred joy comes to the man who, because of Christ, has found justification at the hand of a just and merciful God.

Such a man is ready to follow Christ anywhere, to make any sacrifice, to perform any duty, to obey any commandment, and to count it all a "reasonable service" from an "unprofitable servant." He does not take his forgiveness for granted or begin to walk before God with irreverent familiarity. Imagine saying to the man who wrote Romans, "Paul, I accept your doctrine of justification by faith alone. But can you tell me how my life can be vitalized with Christian joy?" With one stroke of the Word, the apostle would say, "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin." "We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation" (*Romans* 4:7; 5:11). Understanding justification without joy in the Holy Spirit is unthinkable.

The message of justification by grace alone, because of Christ alone, through faith alone is the sweetest and most joyful melody that can ever come to the human heart. Then why are people rushing off to find "the Spirit" in a "second blessing," tongues, or some guru or celebrity? It is because the fear of God is the one great ingredient most lacking in the current religious scene, and therefore the truth of justification is unappreciated as the gift of the Spirit.

The New Testament teaches the fear of God as much as does the Old Testament. Luke describes the church as "walking in the fear of the Lord" (*Acts* 9:31). The writer to the Hebrew Christians exhorts the believers not to "draw back" and find that it "is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (*Hebrews* 10:38, 31). And Paul exhorts the Gentile Christians: "Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he may not spare you either" (*Romans* 11:20, 21).

God is not a popular figure with whom sinners may fraternize on their own level. He is so high, so holy, that he can have no direct fellowship with any man save Jesus Christ. Christ alone will he accept, and Christ's righteousness alone makes him propitious toward us. Well may the most holy saint flee from his throne with dread and terror except that he may *keep* looking to his Substitute at God's right hand

and *keep* believing the good news that he is justified in God's sight solely because Jesus stands there instead of him and for him. This is the only atmosphere in which the Christian continues to live and breathe. Such a Christian will never look on sin as if it were as harmless as a Sunday afternoon frolic.

In short, two things belong together—the fear of God and Christian ethics—just as Solomon declares, "Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (*Ecclesiastes* 12:13). And the last book of the Bible declares, "Fear God and give glory to him, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made Heaven and Earth . . ." (*Revelation* 14:7).

### *The Satisfaction, Justification, and Ethics*

Paul did not write the book of *Romans* just to tell us that God is willing to forgive. The Old Testament had already made that abundantly clear. Nor did he write *Romans* just to tell us that we should live by trusting in God's mercy. The Old Testament was clear enough on that too. The central issue that the epistle deals with is this: How can the God of law and justice forgive sin? How can the moral governor of the universe justify people who deserve to be condemned? It is important to see that the theme of Romans, therefore, is not merely the justification of sinners, but *the justification of God in his justification of sinners*.

God's justice in passing over sins was prefigured in types and shadows of the old dispensation. The prophets who "prophesied of the grace that should come" "inquired and searched diligently" into God's answer to the problem of sin (*I Peter* 1:10, 11). God had revealed himself as gracious and forgiving. He passed over the sins of Israel times without number. He passed over the sins of David without inflicting upon him what justice required. He even forgave the sins of Manasseh, who filled Jerusalem with the blood of God's saints. How is all this consistent with justice? Does the supreme Judge treat his law as a mere regulation to be modified, relaxed, or set aside at pleasure? Should not the Judge uphold the law irrespective of any person? We might even say that God's passing by the sins of men might look

like moments of weak leniency on the part of the great Judge, and therefore his act of pardon might appear as a scandal against the divine government.

Then God himself answers in the holy wrath that fell on the person of Christ. Never had Earth or Heaven beheld such a display of awful, holy justice as when God spared not his only Son. So Paul points to the cross of Christ and declares:

God meant by this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (*Romans* 3:25-26).

There are some who feel that forgiveness of sins proceeds from an easy-going benevolence. Consequently, they are also easy-going about sin, saying in their hearts, "There is plenty of forgiveness with the Lord." Others propose that Christ died merely to show us that God will excuse our sins and good-naturedly pass them by. Such sentimental thoughts of Calvary allow them to sin with an easy conscience. Then there are some who see the atonement as a skillful maneuver on the part of God to "get around his law." So why should not they also spend their lives getting around the law?

The Biblical doctrine of the satisfaction of God's law undergirds all Christian ethics. It shows us that God was not only providing for the justification of sinners, but for the justification of his moral order in the universe. It shows us that the divine law and government must be maintained and vindicated. Calvary was the highest honor that God himself could pay to his law. Prophecy had declared of Christ, "He will magnify the law and make it honorable" (*Isaiah* 42:21). Never was the law of God more highly honored than when Christ stood before the bar of justice to make satisfaction for the damage done. Luther declared, "Now although out of pure grace God does not impute our sins to us, he nonetheless did not want to do this until complete and ample satisfaction of his law and his righteousness had been made." Carl Henry wrote in

*Personal Christian Ethics*: "The Cross is the center of the moral universe, unveiling God's absolute refusal to suspend his law of holiness."

## *Faith, Justification, and Ethics*

We must now consider the nature and action of faith in the sinner's justification. Faith is the root of every good work, the tree that blossoms and bears a harvest of ethical action. God does care for good works and the honor of his law. His holy nature demands a righteousness that conforms to his commandments without variableness or shadow of turning. Paul declares, "the doers of the law shall be justified" (*Romans* 2:13). Perfect obedience to his law is the only condition upon which God will give any man eternal life (*Matthew* 19:17). As Luther said, "The law must be fulfilled so that not a jot or tittle shall be lost, otherwise man will be condemned without hope."

The good news of the Gospel is that Christ has lived this life of perfect obedience. He has fulfilled the conditions upon which God will justify his people. Jesus lived this life in our name and on our behalf. This is why the apostle says that we are justified by Christ (*Galatians* 3:17), by his obedience (*Romans* 5:18, 19). So it is perfectly true to say that the *meritorious* cause of our justification is a life of good works—not ours, of course, but Christ's. While the death of Jesus (his passive obedience) is the basis upon which God forgives sin, the life of Jesus (his active obedience) is the basis upon which God can impute to us a life of perfect obedience. We need to hear more about the redemptive nature of Christ's life, for this is what fulfills the law and entitles us to eternal life.

God does not justify us because of our faith—as if faith had any redemptive value. Neither does God now accept faith instead of perfect obedience to his law. (This is the error of neo-nomianism, which says that Christ died to change the conditions, to make it possible for God to impose an easier standard.) Faith is not the *meritorious cause* of justification but merely the *instrumental cause*. By faith a sinner assents—agrees—to God's offer of

salvation. Justice acknowledges that this life, which the sinner now accepts as his, satisfies the demands of the law, and God pronounces him justified.

The Reformers clearly saw that the moral law of God has three uses:

- a. First use—to restrain sin in society;
- b. Second use—to point out sin and to lead the sinner to Christ;
- c. Third use—to be a rule of life for Christians.

In the last one hundred years it has become quite popular to reject all three uses of the law. This is antinomianism. It undermines the whole structure of Christian ethics, destroys all legal content of justification by faith, and betrays the cause of the Reformation.

When we say that the Christian is not under the obligation to the law, we had better be clear that we mean obligation to satisfy its claims for perfect righteousness and not obligation to obey it as a rule of life. But many fail to make that distinction. Does the justified believer have any dealing with the law? The satisfaction should be to us a constant reminder of the unrelieved heinousness of breaking God's law. The freedom of justification by faith alone is freedom to obey, the privilege to obey a law so royal, so holy (*Romans* 7:6, 12, 25; *James* 2:10). Far from not being under obligation to keep the law, love puts us under double obligation to keep it.

There are at least four kinds of teaching that open the door to antinomianism:

a. *Making Grace Antagonistic to Law.* The Reformers made a sharp distinction between the law and the Gospel, but they were careful to write into all the great confessions that the moral law of God always remains valid as a rule of life for believers. But in the last one hundred years there has developed a kind of teaching that sets the moral law in opposition to grace and discards the concept of the law's third use.

b. *Enthusiasm.* By "enthusiasm" we do not mean religious fanaticism which causes people to jump up

and down in spiritual ecstasy. "Enthusiasm" is a teaching that claims direct guidance from the Holy Spirit apart from the written, outside-of-me Word of God. Instead of sound teaching on the proper use of the law, there are many today who feel that the Holy Spirit dwells in them and tells them what to do quite apart from any teaching of the law. Luther had to meet this error from those whom he called "Enthusiasts." The Reformer saw that their basic error was to make a dangerous separation of Word and Spirit. Luther and Calvin had to maintain that the Holy Spirit works in the Word and never apart from the Word. The only way to hear the Holy Spirit speak to us is to listen to the Word, and the only way to obey the Spirit is to obey that objective Word of God. We must have none of this notion that we can get a private word from the Lord. The charismatics who claim visions, private revelations, and direct information from God are only carrying what has been a popular notion to its logical end. Under the guise of honoring the Holy Spirit, the Enthusiast's inner voices replace the absolute norm of God's moral law.

c. *Quietism.* Quietism is the teaching that the Christian life is lived by being a passive channel for the operation of the Holy Spirit. The victorious life is said to be lived when the believer stops trying and lets God do it all. ("Let go and let God.") The error of quietism is that it tends to make the Holy Spirit's work in the heart *substitutionary*. This is the result of an inadequate focus on the grand facts of Christ's substitutionary work. The work Christ did in life and death was substitutionary—it was in our place and instead of us. Justification comes by the passive acceptance of what was done on the cross apart from any effort of ours. But the same thing cannot be said about the inward, sanctifying work of the Spirit. The Spirit does not replace human effort. He does not substitute for human obedience. The Christian life is not a matter of refraining from effort while the Spirit does it all. The Christian life is a struggle, a race, a fight; and the Spirit stirs the believer up and equips him for holy warfare. Faith is not an opiate but a stimulant. It does not compose us for sleep but for action.

Justification is possessed only by *faith*. He who has no faith has no justification. Saving faith is faith in

Christ and his work, not in some personal experience of being born again. There is a popular doctrine which says that a man can be eternally saved whether he believes or not. But belief is not optional. He who does not obey does not believe, and he who does not believe will not be saved. The churches are full of spiritually dead souls who are asleep in their sins; yet they content themselves that they are saved because of some past experience. They have faith in their experience; they have no faith in the Gospel.

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